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MACEDONIA PERENNIAL BONE OF CONTENTION

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MACEDONIA

PERENNIAL BONE OF CONTENTION

The "Macedonian Question" has again arisen as an irritant in Yugoslav-Bulgarian relations. In a speech on 12 September 1958, Dimitur Ganev, Bulgarian politburo member and party theoretician, charged the Yugoslav Government with attempting to denationalize the Macedonian population in Yugoslavia. Accusations in the Albanian press during September to the effect that Yugoslavia had persecuted its Albanian minority indicated that the Bulgarian attack was part of a wider Bloc anti-Tito campaign. Yugoslavia protested both the Albanian and the Bulgarian charges. On 5 October 1958, Yugoslavia announced the formation of a semi-independent Macedonian Orthodox Church within its Macedonian People's Republic.

Questions of national identity, religious authority, rival territorial claims, and "Bloc" interests are all involved in the complex Macedonian issue, which has plagued Balkan relations for many generations. The term Macedonia as commonly understood refers both to an ill-defined geographic area in the Balkan Peninsula and to the concept of a nation of Macedonian Slav peoples.

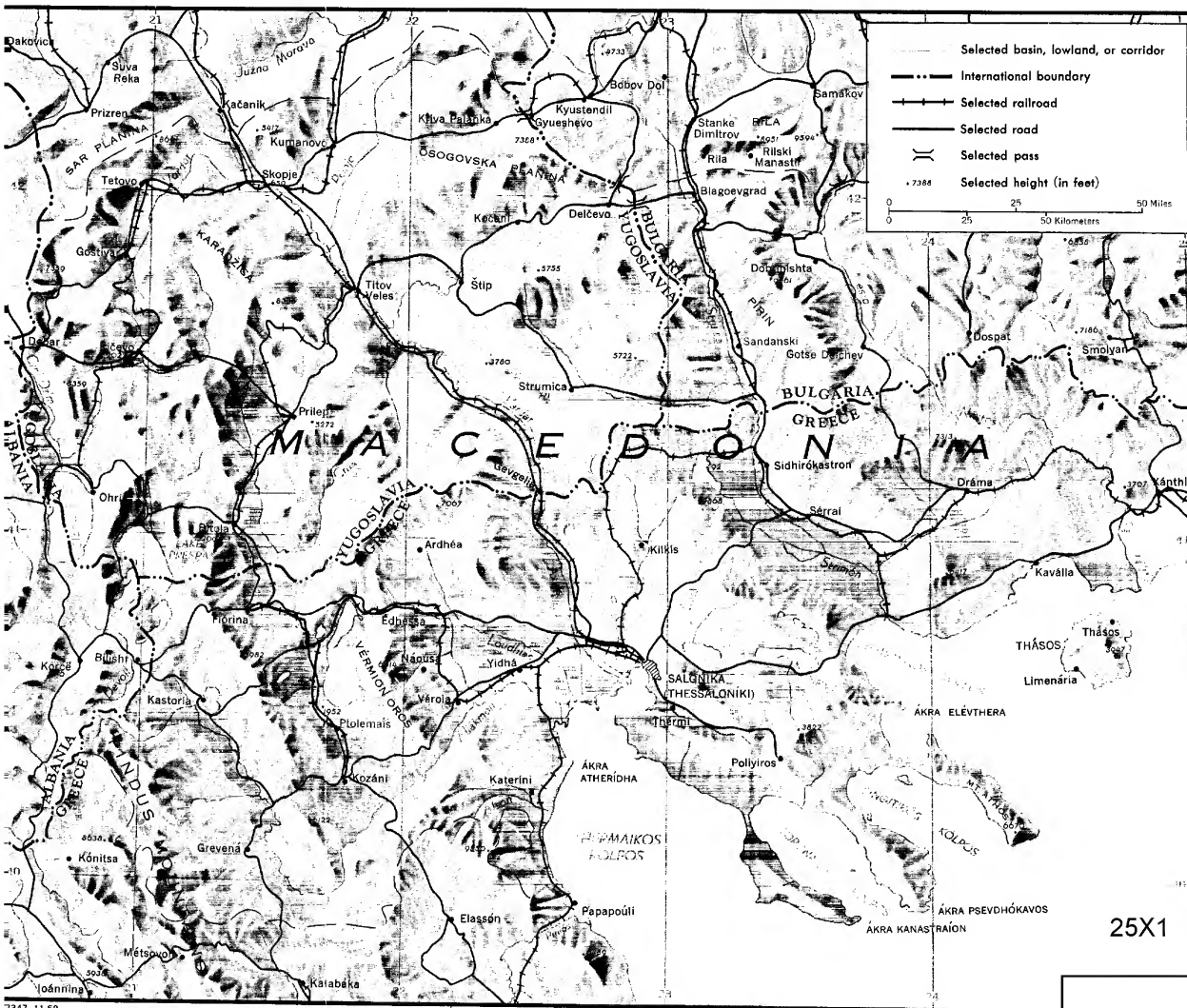
The core area of Macedonia is generally recognized and accepted, but its outer limits cannot be defined with any degree of accuracy since the area is neither a homogeneous physical, economic, nor sociological unit with sharply defined borders*. The boundary shown on the accompanying map incorporates the core area accepted by most authorities. The area thus bounded is roughly coincident with the Macedonian People's Republic in Yugoslavia (Vardar Macedonia), the Blagoevgrad Okrug in Bulgaria (Pirin Macedonia), and the Dhiámérisma (region) of Makedhonia in Greece (Aegean Macedonia)**. It consists of rough mountainous terrain interrupted by a series of fertile basins drained by the extensive Vardar (Axiós), Aliákmon, Struma (Strímon), and Mesta (Néstos) River systems. The Vardar Valley in conjunction with the Morava Valley to the north forms an almost continuous north-south corridor through Macedonia connecting Belgrade on the Danube with the port of Salonika (Thessaloníki) on the Aegean Sea. A lesser route through Macedonia is the Struma Corridor to the east, which connects the Aegean littoral in Greece with the Sofia Basin in Bulgaria. Historically the existence of these corridors has made Macedonia a region of transit between Central Europe and the eastern Mediterranean and has facilitated its control from the outside. Apart from the main north-south corridors, a chaotic juxtaposition of mountains and basins has tended to inhibit local communication and the development of strong local political organization.

In general Macedonia is not richly endowed with natural resources. The basin areas are generally fertile and support relatively dense agricultural populations, whereas the mountains are likely to have poor soils, scant vegetation, and sparse population, mostly engaged in herding. Mineral and fuel deposits have given rise to small-scale mining operations in various localities, and lumbering is carried on in the higher mountains, especially in Bulgarian Macedonia.

Aside from any intrinsic value as "real estate," the geographic position of Macedonia makes it important to both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Bloc. Yugoslav Macedonia is potentially an air corridor and, to a lesser degree, a land bridge between exposed Albania and the rest of the Soviet Bloc. While Yugoslavia remained a loyal satellite, Bloc interests in the region were protected; with Tito's expulsion, however, Albania has been left as an isolated exclave. To Yugoslavia, the Macedonian People's Republic served in the immediate postwar years as a magnet which Tito hoped would attract both Bulgarian and Greek Macedonia, thus providing Yugoslavia with an outlet to the Aegean Sea and greatly enlarging its sphere of influence in the Balkans.

*See "Boundaries of Macedonia," Map Research Bulletin, No. 12, December 1949, for a fuller discussion of this question.

**This term is of Slav (probably Yugoslav) origin and concept and was concocted for obvious political purposes to replace the term "Greek Macedonia."



Although the professed national consciousness of the Macedonian Slavs is an important aspect of the "Macedonian Question," Macedonia is not a region of ethnic homogeneity. In addition to the Macedonian Slavs, the other ethnic groups now found in the region are Bulgarian, Serbian, Greek, Albanian, Turkish, and Vlach (a Rumanian-speaking seminomadic people). Even groups sharing the same racial or national background may differ in language or religious affiliation. The bulk of the population is Eastern Orthodox Christian; but the Turks, many of the Albanians, and small proportions of other ethnic groups are Moslem.

There is some question as to whether the Macedonian Slavs actually constitute a separate ethnic group distinct from the Bulgarians and Serbians. They speak a Slavic dialect transitional between Serbian and Bulgarian. Yugoslavia maintains that this is a separate language, spoken by about 69 percent of the population of Yugoslav Macedonia, and that the Macedonian Slavs are, therefore, a separate ethnic group. Bulgaria considers that the Macedonian Slavs share a common history and culture with the Bulgarians and that the two peoples speak only slightly different dialects of a common language. The Macedonian Slavs and Bulgarians together constitute 80 to 95 percent of the population of Bulgarian Macedonia; but the ratio of Macedonian Slavs to Bulgarians cannot be ascertained. Greece does not recognize a Macedonian nationality; but, under the term "Slavophone," the Macedonian Slavs of Greece are considered as a linguistic minority variously estimated at 3.5 to 12 percent of the total population of Greek Macedonia.

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The Macedonian Slavs themselves appear to have had little or no feeling of national identity prior to the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and World War I. Since that period, however, having been alternately wooed and oppressed by both Serb and Bulgar and prodded by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, the Macedonian Slavs appear to have gradually developed a national consciousness and aspirations for political independence.

Bulgarian and Yugoslav rivalry for hegemony in Macedonia has centered largely around attempts of each to command the allegiance of all the Macedonian Slavs. These attempts have run the gamut from cultural and religious education to terrorism and military control. After World War II, Tito's plans envisaged the incorporation of both Bulgarian and Greek Macedonia into the Macedonian People's Republic, and the federation of the remainder of Bulgaria with Yugoslavia. Bulgaria, on the other hand, sought the creation of an autonomous Macedonia state in which the Bulgarian, Yugoslav, and Greek portions would be combined within a loose federation of Communist Balkan states. After first approving Tito's plan, Moscow later reversed itself -- a few months before the Yugoslav-Cominform break in 1948. The Cominform then seems to have adopted the Bulgarian position on the Macedonian Question. During the brief rapprochement between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Bloc (1955-58), the plan to annex Bulgarian Macedonia to Yugoslavia was reportedly revived, but apparently no concrete steps were taken toward its realization.

Each of the three governments is attempting to develop its Macedonian territory economically and culturally in order to strengthen the allegiance of its population, to defeat any irredentist propaganda of its neighbors, and (in the case of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia) to increase the attractiveness of its own irredentist propaganda.

Yugoslavia has expended considerable effort on the development of industry and improvement of agriculture in the Macedonian People's Republic, which is one of the least developed regions of the country. Some 65 factories have been built in the last 10 years, reflecting an effort to utilize local resources and water power. Among the products of these factories are chrome, bichromate, ferro-alloys, ornamental metals, carbide, cement, glass, porcelain, veneers, processed food, and woolen and cotton cloth. A hydroelectric plant is also under construction in northwestern Macedonia. Even now, however, only about 23 percent of the employed population is engaged in industry -- the second lowest percentage among the republics of Yugoslavia. Although Macedonia lags behind the other Yugoslav republics in agricultural yields, it is of importance in the national economy as the number-one producer of cotton, tobacco, and poppies. Most of the investment in agriculture has been devoted to irrigation and drainage projects.

Much attention has also been paid to social and cultural development within the Macedonian People's Republic. Probably the most important cultural program undertaken was the official recognition of a Macedonian language and place names and the concomitant establishment of schools, libraries, printing houses, societies, theaters, and radio stations to foster the development of this official tongue and to combat illiteracy in general. The Yugoslav Government apparently also made some attempts to extend its official Macedonian language to the Macedonian Slavs of Bulgarian Macedonia, much to the indignation of Bulgaria. Recently, in the verbal dispute between the two countries, a Bulgarian official spokesman alleged that the Macedonian population in Yugoslav Macedonia is being compelled to give up its mother tongue and accept an artificially molded, strongly Serbianized language. The Yugoslav program of granting the Macedonian Slavs a limited amount of political and cultural autonomy within the larger framework of the Yugoslav state seems to have fostered a desire on the part of the Macedonians for even more autonomy. Their recent desire for a completely independent Macedonian Orthodox Church -- although not fully realized -- was one such manifestation.

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Bulgarian Macedonia, with only 1.6 percent of Bulgaria's gross industrial production in 1956, is the least developed part of that country. Nevertheless, it has certain natural assets that give it a measure of economic importance. The Struma Valley, open to the influences of the warm Mediterranean climate to the south, is being developed as an area of intensive crop cultivation -- specializing in fruits, vegetables and industrial crops such as peanuts, poppies, and varieties of tobacco and cotton that cannot be widely grown in other parts of Bulgaria. Several small irrigation systems and hydroelectric plants utilizing the ample water resources of the high Pirin and Rila Mountains have been constructed as part of the regional development program. Both lumbering and lignite mining have been expanded in recent years. The coniferous forest reserves are among the largest in Bulgaria.

The Greeks, although not involved in the present dispute, are naturally sensitive to any raising of the Macedonian Question. Greek Macedonia includes Salonika, the second largest city and port of Greece, as well as some of the most important agricultural, mineral, and fuel resources of the country. The region produces over half of the tobacco crop of Greece, the principal export commodity of the country. Economic development in the region has progressed considerably since World War II. Drainage and irrigation work, initiated in the 1920's, is still being expanded. A hydroelectric station has been built and the power network extended. Plans are being implemented to develop the Ptolemais lignite deposit, one of the most important potential sources of power in Greece. Following the Greek Civil War (1946-49) the government undertook to rebuild some of the border villages abandoned by their former Slavophone inhabitants when they fled or were driven northward into Communist countries. These villages were resettled with ethnic Greeks. Various other rural development projects aimed at improving life in the border villages were also undertaken. In part, this program was carried on to counteract developments on the Bulgarian side of the border. The Bulgarians had supplied their border villages with electricity and running water, reportedly to impress the neighboring Greeks with the amenities of life behind the Iron Curtain.

Although the verbal exchange between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria appears to be merely a propaganda battle, it points up the fact that, in spite of a decade of quiescence, Macedonia continues to be a potential trouble spot. Even though the dispute over Macedonia should remain in the status of a "cold war," the expression of concern -- whether genuine or feigned -- for the interests of the Macedonian Slavs is an excellent weapon in fighting such a war.

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